

# The Bells ring out in Newcastle

## John Bell Wilkinson 1847 - 1929

*by John Carnaby Eng Tech LCGI MCIPHE RP*

### **Celebrating excellence**

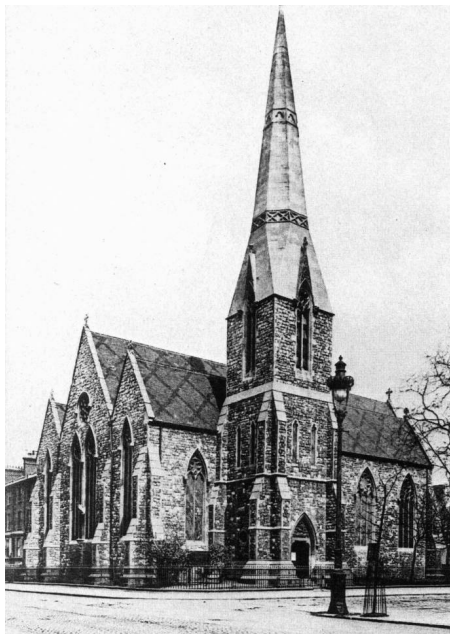
I have written this potted history of John Bell Wilkinson to coincide with a Centenary Dinner, organised by the Newcastle and District Branch of the CIPHE, to be held on 17th October 2013 at The Royal Station Hotel, Newcastle, to celebrate the 100 years of the JB Wilkinson Apprentice Merit Shield Award.

The Shield this centenary year will be presented to New College Durham.

**T**his story begins in the 1830's with John Bell Wilkinson's Grandfather, Richard Wilkinson a Mariner, who lived with his family in one of the first houses to be built in Bedford Street, Sunderland on the site of the old Panns Field. It was just to the east of their family house that the first cholera epidemic was recorded in England. Grandfather Richard lived there with his two son's Bell and Yeal Wilkinson, both Shipwrights and aged 25 in 1840.

In the early 1840s Bell Wilkinson decided to move from Sunderland to London and commenced living at 15 Arbour Street East, Stepney. Once he was established in his new occupation as an Official Coal Weigher, he was followed down by his childhood sweetheart, Mary Maltby Leighton, who had previously been a female servant in one of the Wilkinson's houses in Nile Street, Sunderland, and they married in St Dunstan's Church, Stepney on 11<sup>th</sup> May 1846. Their son, John Bell Wilkinson, who is the main character in this history, was born in Stepney just under a year later in 1847.

In 1861 now aged 14 years and still living with his parents in Stepney, John was training to be a plumber, and when he finally completed his plumbing training in the late 1860s, he decided to move back to Sunderland, the birthplace of the Wilkinson family. In 1871 John was living with his Uncle Yeal Wilkinson aged 57, now retired, at 16 Randolph Street, Sunderland and used the old house in Bedford Street as his workshop. Although John seemed to have now made his home in Sunderland, over the next 10 years he made a number of journeys back and forth to London to see his parents and his London sweetheart Louisa



*St Paul's Church,  
Bow Common,  
Stepney. London*



*John Bell Wilkinson wearing his long service medal  
this portrait is reproduced here with the kind permission  
of the Sunderland Volunteer Life Brigade.  
It hangs in their Watch House at Roker.*

Ellen Lynn. During one of these visits to London John and Louisa decided to marry and the marriage took place on 28<sup>th</sup> January 1872, at St Pauls Church, Bow Common, Stepney; they were both 24 years of age. Before their marriage Louisa had been living at 18, St Pauls Road, Stepney, and was the daughter of John Lynn (a member of the old Blyth family), a London Master Mariner, deceased. This address was only a short distance away from where John's parents lived.

As a staunch Liberal, John was among those who joined the London Liberal Club when it was opened for admissions to the public in 1872, this lead him to becoming a leader of liberalism in Sunderland for the next 50 years.

John continued to travel between London and Sunderland to carry out his work as a plumber and gasfitter staying with his parents in Stepney, at 12 St Pauls Road. In 1873, they were back at 16 Randolph Street, Sunderland, living with his Uncle Yeal, and it was here that John and Mary had their first child, a daughter, Louisa Marie. Their second child was born in 1876, a son, John Lynn Bell Wilkinson, who would also later become a plumber.

John and Mary then moved to their own larger family home with 7 rooms, 3 attics, a coach house and a stable at 17 Salem Street, Sunderland, along with his Uncle Yeal now aged 68, a general servant and a nursemaid for the children. This is where John's third child was born in 1880, a son, Stanley Yeal Wilkinson. Sadly young Stanley did not live very long and died at barely a year old. When John's parents in London received this sad news, they made up their minds to move back to Sunderland to



be near their son and daughter-in-law and their two grand children. Their address was 17, Elmwood Street.

By 1881 John had a very successful plumbing business in Sunderland, employing 5 men and also training 4 apprentices and advertising for additional tradesmen, using his Bedford Street address as his working premises. J B Wilkinson carried out the Plumbing work at the Monkwearmouth Barracks, Roker Avenue, which was opened by General Booth in September 1883.

John who had a great interest in Freemasonry joined a Masonic Lodge and in 1885 was installed as Worshipful Master of Fenwick Lodge (No 1389) at the Masonic Hall, Park Terrace Sunderland and presided at their Annual Banquet that was held at the Queens Hotel that year.

Life for the Wilkinsons continued its normal course and the only news reported over the next few years was that in 1890, J B Wilkinson carried the plumbing installation at Christ Church, Bishopwearmouth and in June of that year his office/workshop at 13, Bedford Street was struck by lightning and although debris from the damaged chimney pots was scattered around the street, thankfully no one was injured.

In 1892, John's long time friend and Uncle, Yeal Wilkinson died in aged 78, while living with John and his family, he was sadly missed. Uncle Yeal Wilkinson had obviously been a well-liked man; an American friend described him as - *"a grand gentleman of the 'old school', 70 years old, and in good health. He would never ride in a 'tramcar,' always walked, no matter the distance. He wore a silk hat frock coat, and was a distinguished citizen, a strong, sturdy, and energetic man. He was very kind and hospitable to his kin from Canada and the United States, and always had an open door to them."*

In 1893 J B Wilkinson, installed the lighting, heating, hot water and plumbing services at St Columba's School, Southwick. A local directory dated 1894, shows that he had two addresses: - John Bell Wilkinson, plumber and Gasfitter, 13, Bedford Street which was his office/workshop and his new home address at 2 Park Road, Sunderland.

In June 1898, John's son, John Lynn Bell Wilkinson now aged 22, married Barbara Clough in Sunderland and lived with his parents in Park Road. He had now completed his plumbing training with his father and was working as a foreman plumber in the family business.

In 1899 the J B Wilkinson tender was accepted for the *"removal of old and fixing new closets, fittings and traps to lavatories and baths and providing new sinks in the Work House Hospital"* in Kayll Road, Sunderland. Also during that year John presided over a small private dinner at the Grand Hotel to celebrate the election of Alderman Rudland to his aldermanic position.

In 1901, John now aged 54, had an unfortunate cycling accident and was a patient in the Victoria Cottage Hospital, Buller's Green, Morpeth, Northumberland. An article at the time in the Sunderland Daily Echo dated 25/3/1901 read.... *Accident to Mr J. B. Wilkinson. A telegram was received this morning by the son of Mr John Bell Wilkinson, the well-known plumber, intimating that that gentleman was lying seriously ill in hospital*



*In July 1902, J B Wilkinson carried out the plumbing installation to the new schools that were opened at Wycliffe Road, High Barnes, Sunderland.*

*at Rothbury. No particulars are yet to hand beyond the fact that he was found lying unconscious on the road to Rothbury with his bicycle beside him. It is presumed that he met with an accident whilst riding his machine.* Fortunately John did recover enough to continue his plumbing work but it did cause him to later step down from his various civic and voluntary positions.

Later that year John had his first election as a Town Councillor for Park Ward Sunderland and then in May 1902 a meeting was held in the South Durham School room for the purpose of *"furthering the candidature of Mr John Bell Wilkinson"*. At this meeting a number of Alderman and numerous local Councillors were present and during the evening many complimentary speeches were made to him. In his reply, amongst many other local topics concerning the street lighting, the roads and open spaces etc, he said, *"Another important matter was the housing of the working classes. It was a problem virtually affecting not only the welfare of the poor themselves, but also the health of the town and he felt it should be treated in liberal spirit – not on such hard and fast business lines as, say, the trams and lighting (hear hear). He was a believer in technical training and had associations with leading technical education systems of the time. He had for a great number of years been a representative of the Worshipful Company of Plumbers, who devoted years of time and very large sums of money to the furtherance and advancement of technical teaching in the most important of all branches – that touching health. He had also for a long period been an honorary examiner for the Technical Education Department of the Northumberland County Council. He had, therefore, some knowledge of technical education and great deal of sympathy with it"*. Alderman Gibson moved *"That this meeting considers Mr J B Wilkinson a fit a proper person to represent Park Ward on the Town Council"* and continued by saying, *"The Gentleman would make a most useful member of the Asylum, Building and Health Committee owing to vast knowledge he had gained in his business career and altogether would make an excellent representative"*. Unfortunately his time on Sunderland Town Council was short lived due to his ever increasing business and various illnesses within his family.

A meeting of the North of England District Council of the National Registration of Plumbers was held in the Town Hall Sunderland in April 1903. The Mayor of Sunderland and a number of councillors, including Alderman Richard Hind of Stockton, a Past Master of the Worshipful Company of Plumbers and John Bell Wilkinson, attended this meeting. It was reported

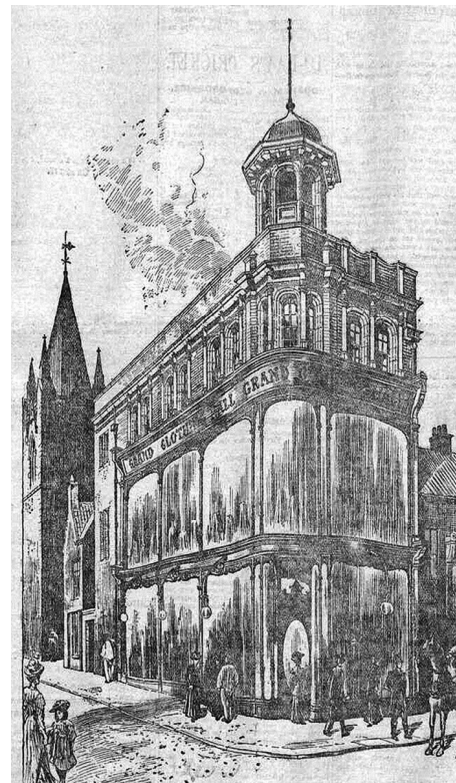
that the number of registered plumbers in the district was 265, 83 masters and 182 operatives. During the various discussions John said that a considerable number of years ago he approached the Technical Education Authority of that time and was informed that there was no room in the Town Hall to accommodate plumbing classes. In the meantime he urged young men who were anxious to attend such a course of plumbing education to attend those at South Shields or Newcastle. John Bell Wilkinson assured them that he would see to it that the question of expense would not prevent them from doing so. This was received with acclamation. The meeting concluded by being advised that in the North of England district 37 members of Parliament had notified their intention of supporting the Bill for the Registration of Plumbers in the House of Commons.

In 1903, a grandson was born, Robert Lynn Bell Wilkinson, who would also become plumber like his Father and Grandfather.

John was on the founding committee when the Alnwick Castle Golf Club was formed and opened in 1907. The fee was 1 Guinea for men and 10s 6d for ladies. The Duke of Northumberland was elected their President. The 9-hole course was ready to play in July that year, but it would take until 1995 to see the course extended to the full 18 holes.

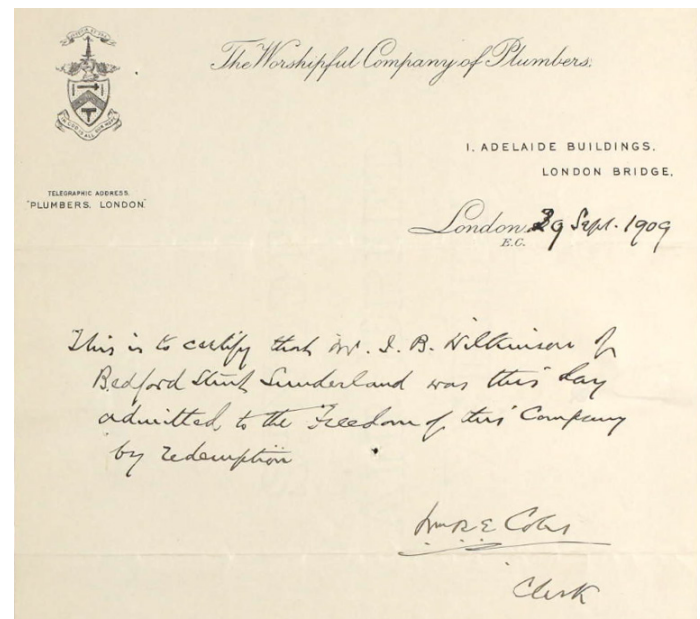
On 4th March 1908 John's Father, Bell Wilkinson died at the grand age of 93 years, leaving to J B Wilkinson, Plumber, the princely sum of £1,326-7s-6d.

J B Wilkinson was once again in London in September 1909, this time to become a Freeman of the City of London and a Liveryman of The Worshipful Company of Plumbers' and it would seem that over the next few years John had two homes, one at 107, Harford Street, Stepney in London and other at 2, Park Road, Sunderland.

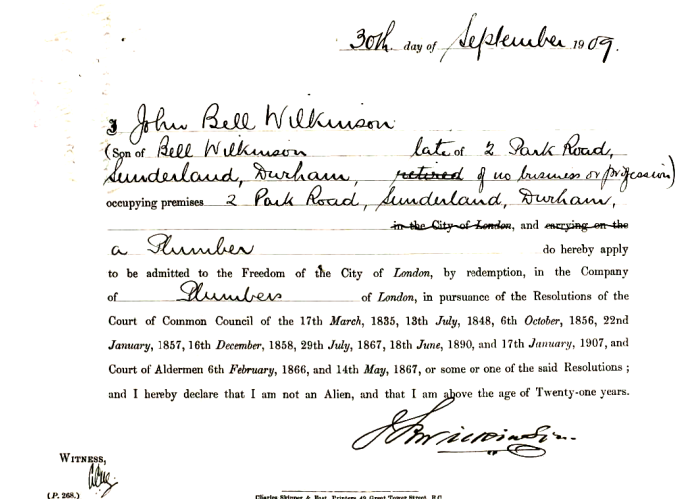


(Reported in Morpeth and Herald Reporter 1/6/1907) The Grand Clothing Hall, situated on the east side of Cumberland Street and High Street, Sunderland was opened in 1904, J B Wilkinson was responsible for its plumbing and electrical services.

students by Mr Wilkinson on behalf of the Worshipful Company of Plumbers, who congratulated the students on the honour they had won and also wished the teacher, Mr Metcalfe and his students all success in their work during the coming session.



Letter from the Clerk of the Worshipful Company of Plumbers, W.R.E. Coles.



Freedom of the City of London

A newspaper article at the time entitled "PLUMBERS' MERIT SHIELD" dated 13<sup>th</sup> July 1914 reported... At the beginning of their last session the Council for the Registration of Plumbers in the North of England district decided to offer a merit shield for the best specimens of work executed by students in attendance at plumbing classes in the northern district. On the result of the adjudication, Darlington Technical College has been awarded the shield and Sunderland Technical College placed next in order of merit.

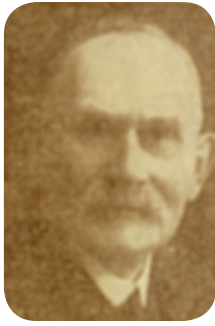
At a meeting of the Darlington Secondary Education Committee the shield was handed over to the committee for the first year by Mr J B Wilkinson, of Sunderland, vice-chairman of the District Council and was accepted by Councillor E Wooler, on behalf of the Technical College. Certificates were also presented to the

On 4<sup>th</sup> March 1920 the very sad news was reported that John's son John Lynn Bell Wilkinson, his only son and foreman plumber for many years, had died while living at 2, Bedes Terrace, Sunderland at the early age of 43.

In 1922, at the age of 75, John Bell Wilkinson reached the pinnacle of his plumbing career by becoming Master of the Worshipful Company of Plumbers.

Following in his grandfather's footsteps, John's grandson, Robert Lynn Bell Wilkinson aged 22 and another family plumber, became a Freeman of the City of London and also a Liveryman of the Worshipful Company of Plumbers' in 1925.





*John Bell  
Wilkinson Pictured  
in the Sunderland  
Daily Echo in 1929*

In 1927 John now aged 80 was invited to be guest of honour at a function of the Sunderland Volunteer Life Brigade, an organisation that he had been a member of for 50 years and was their Senior Captain and Honorary Treasurer up until the time of his death. He was pleased to be presented with his framed portrait that was to be hung in the Brigade House, Roker. About the same time John was presented with a silver tray for his services as a past chairman and past treasurer of the Sunderland Liberal Club where he was responsible for getting their finances into good order in the early days when they suffered difficult times.

John Bell Wilkinson died in Sunderland on 20<sup>th</sup> February 1929 aged 82. The funeral was held at St John's Wesleyan Church. His waxed oak coffin was draped with a Union Jack and embellished with a brass plate that displayed his Masonic emblems and the date of his death. His Life Brigadesman's hat and belt rested on top of the coffin which was carried by six Lifebrigadesmen from the Southside and Roker Divisions. There was a considerable attendance of colleagues and representatives of organisations that John had been associated with during his long life; ranging from the Royal National Life-Boat Institution and H.M. Coastguards to his Masonic Lodge and plumbing colleagues and of course J B Wilkinson's own employees. Mr W.J.C. Glover, United Operative Plumbers' Association and Messrs Purdy, Taylor and Westcott of the Sunderland and District Master Plumbers Association represented the plumbing trade. His burial followed at Bishopwearmouth Cemetery.



*The foundation  
of the Sunderland  
Volunteer Life Brigade  
commenced in 1877.  
John was actively  
involved with this  
organisation since its  
inception and later  
was their Senior  
Captain and Honorary  
Treasurer of its South  
Side Division.*



*The JB Wilkinson Shield*

Although John Bell Wilkinson was born and bred in London, his roots were most certainly set in the North East of England. His "J B Wilkinson Merit Shield" that was probably made in his Bedford Street plumbing workshop in 1913, has attracted entries from Plumbing Teaching Colleges in the North East for the last century. Qualified members of the Newcastle and District Branch of the Chartered Institute of Plumbing and Heating Engineering judge the winner of this prestigious award and to this day the presentation is always attended by the Master of the Worshipful Company of Plumbers and the President of The Chartered Institute of Plumbing and Heating Engineering.

Finally, John's wife Louisa continued to live at 2 Park Road, up until her death in August 1933 and following John's demise his Plumbing and Heating Engineering business at 13, Bedford Street, was transferred over to his grandson, Robert Lynn Bell Wilkinson RP. The Company name remained unchanged.



## 1697 This Indenture Witnesseth,

That John Brand doth put himself Apprentice to John Wilkes Citizen and Plummer of London, to learn his Art : and for him (after the manner of Apprentice) to serve from the day of the date hereof unto the full end and term of Eight years, from thence following to be fully complete and ended. During which term, the said Apprentice his said Master faithfully shall serve, his secrets keep, his lawful commandments every where gladly do. He will do no damage to his said Master, nor see to be done of others; but he to his power shall let or forthwith give warning to his said Master of the same.

He shall not waste the goods of his said Master, nor lend them unlawfully to any. He shall not commit Fornication, nor contract Matrimony within the said term. He shall not play at Cards, Dice, Tables, or any other unlawful Games, whereby his said Master may have any loss. With his own Goods or others, during the said term, without licence of his said Master, he shall neither buy nor sell, he shall not haunt Taverns or Playhouses, nor absent himself from the said Masters service day or night unlawfully: But in all things as a faithful Apprentice, he shall behave himself towards his said Master and all his, during the said term. And the said Master, his said Apprentice in the same Art which he useth, by the best means that he can, shall teach and instruct, or cause to be taught and instructed, finding unto his said Apprentice, meat, drink, apparel, lodging, and all other necessities, according to the custom of the City of London, during the said term. And for the true performance of all and every the said Covenants and Agreements, either of the said Parties bindeth himself unto the other by these presents.



This is an  
actual plumbing  
apprenticeship  
Indenture from 1697